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UA3/3 Dewey Smith: Homecoming for a POW

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3/3
Dr. Kelly Thompson, President Emeritus of Western, was a speaker at the luncheon held by Western on April 5, 1973, honoring Lt. Colonel Dewey Smith in Class of 1952. The following is taken from the taped recording of the luncheon proceedings.

WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY
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President Downing; our distinguished returnee, Dewey Smith; other distinguished visitors; ladies and gentlemen:

President Downing has asked me to say a few appropriate words at this time. The first question to go through one's mind under such circumstances would have to be, what is appropriate?

One of our boys, one of our men, one of our graduates has returned from almost six years as a Prisoner of War in what must have been the worst conceivable situation in all the history of warfare. Dewey Smith is back home to his loved ones--his wife, Norma; his children, Vicky, Sandy, and Chip--with the tremendous range of his emotions which had to be touched and played upon by the very nature of his coming home. And today he is back on the Western campus as a returnee to a place which he has always loved. It would seem to be inappropriate for me not to be deeply serious for these few minutes.

Once upon a time his teammates decided that in his final football game Dewey Smith should score a touchdown, and they gave him the ball on the four-yard line. We were playing Tennessee Tech, and the great Flavious Smith and probably the best line that Tennessee Tech has ever had stopped him cold. They gave the ball to Dewey the second time, and that line stopped him again. They took time out and gave it to him for the third time, and again he was stopped. The net gain for the three efforts was zero. But his teammates called on him for the fourth time; and despite Flavious Smith and despite that line,

he went into the end zone for a touchdown. Dewey, the way you must have felt when, on the fourth and final down, you scored that touchdown might tell you, I think, how inadequate words become when an individual, or a group of individuals, wants to express something that is felt very deeply.

You have been with some of your close friends since you arrived on the campus. Some of us had the pleasure of talking with you, walking around the campus with you, seeing the elation in your eyes at the progress which has transpired at Western and at things which have changed, we hope for the better. You have already felt our attitude, I think; so, perhaps it isn't necessary to linger any further on our feeling, significant as it is.

If I may, I wish to thank you for something which perhaps you don't know about. It is something which I believe every other individual in this audience does know about. We were involved for so long in that strange and ugly war in which you gave so many years of your life. Many things happened in this country that the vast majority of Americans could never be proud of. The worst of these perhaps was that we, as a society, began to blame all of our shortcomings, all of our faults, all of our problems, and all of our own sins on the war. It became a ready scapegoat for every single inch, foot, or yard in which we individually, or as a nation, failed to measure up. As you know, when one begins to blame everything else but himself, or when people begin to blame everything else but themselves, a deterioration is bound to follow; and so, the very fabric of the structure of the United States of America began to rot. The deterioration was so gradual that many people didn't see it; but somehow or another, all of us were aware that this deterioration was taking place.

We saw this thing grow under four Presidents. We came to recent days

almost with a national sense of despair as to how this deterioration might ever stop; and there was a fear throughout the country that even when the war did end, the damage would be so great from the rot from within that we might never recover from the effects. Then suddenly, as if from Heaven, something happened, and you were a dynamic, viable part of it; although from your viewpoint, you could not possibly have seen it.

Through the great medium of television, which with all of its faults has many wonderful attributes, America saw its POWs coming home.

Individuals who hadn't had their hearts moved for ages and people who had not felt patriotic twinges in years suddenly became rejuvenated when, for example, one of your peers, a ranking officer, on the plane load of returning POWs finished his remarks by saying, "God bless America."

One could almost feel the sensation going up and down the collective spines of America. The words that were said by those whom we heard were words directed to God, and to family, and to country. The words--the look in the eyes of returning POWs, like yourself and like Francis's brother, Kenneth--the way your shoulders were held--and the snap of your salutes did more to revitalize the fabric of a decaying moral and spiritual structure than almost anything that anyone could have dreamed of. We were divided, badly divided. We had every kind of group in this country that one could imagine; and I say whether each of them, or each person in those groups, was right or wrong is not a matter of importance as of this moment. We were divided and astray and asunder, and everybody had his own analysis and solution to a problem which ninety percent of us knew very little about.

Perhaps those qualities that came to us from you--transmitted to us,

to our minds and to our hearts--made us understand again that what we have here, what we have inherited, is not only something to be thankful for and to cherish, but something for which we have the responsibility of preserving.

You gave to our country, you and all the others who came home, something that this country will never forget; because you gave us a new pride in those things which somehow or another we might have forgotten were so very, very important.

Like all of your Western friends and others, I watched, hoping to get a glimpse of you. I watched for Kenneth, hoping to catch a glimpse of him. It wasn't our good fortune, however, to see you walk down the ramp and snap to attention and smile and express yourself in the inspiring manner which we heard from so many, but we sensed your presence as a part of the inspiration.

You have done something for all of us with your coming home in the manner in which you came. That is a greater gift than can be described; and for that and for all the other things which make Dewey Smith the man that he is, and on behalf of all these people here, thank you.